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HINDUSTANI LITERATURE OF TO-DAY.

SOME SUGGESTIONS.

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THE zeal for making a nation's great instrument of thought,—its language,—correct and worthy, is undoubtedly a sign full of promise,—a weighty earnest of future power. Thus wrote Mathew Arnold in his charming essay on the "Literary influence of Academies." For nearly forty years, owing to a variety of causes, little or no attention has been paid by the Mohamedan community to the cultivation or encouragement of Urdu literature. It cannot be suggested, however, that throughout this period Hindustani literature has lain absolutely fallow or entirely neglected. The only thing that we do suggest is that its growth has been slow and fitful and not as it should have been, regard being had to its position and importance in India. We can mention great names that have arisen and great works that have been written during this period ; but there has been a marked absence of a conscious, deliberate effort, on the part of the Mohamedan community, to improve, to extend, to enrich their literature ; there has been a marked absence of that pride which every nation, worthy of that title, feels in its own national literature and which carries it onward in the path of glory and renown. This has been owing, as we have intimated, to a variety of causes : the foremost of them being the astonishing growth of English education, for reasons other than mere love of learning or acquisition of knowledge. Our own language was assigned a secondary, almost an unimportant place, in the curriculum of studies. And the natural result was its steady decline, leading, slowly but surely, to its wilful neglect. I cannot speak with confidence of the United Provinces or other parts of India, but of this I am positive that not one Mohamedan, out of a hundred, in Bengal or Behar, can write or speak his language with any degree of accuracy ; much less with ease and elegance. This is a mournful and distressing truth. On the contrary, I have known graduates of the Calcutta University—Mohamedan graduates—who look upon their own language and literature with silent scorn or thinly-disguised irony. And this not because Urdu literature is really a heap of nonsense, unworthy of the consideration of graduates of the Calcutta University, but simply because they have never taken the trouble to study it. They have formed their judgment and founded their conclusion upon the study of low-class Urdu journals or, perhaps, works of ill-educated writers who court fame, rather notoriety, by the publication of a very inferior order of poetry. But whatever may be the grounds for such opinion, not the worst detractors of our literature can charge it

either with poverty of thought or a want of dignity of expression. The permanent elements of good literature : width of thought, flawless beauty and exquisite dignity of expression, an unfettered outlook, a catholic sympathy, a deep insight into man and his character, measure, sobriety, effectiveness : all these are to be found in Urdu literature and in sufficient richness, alike in our prose and in our poetry. To charge Hindustani literature with a dearth and poverty of noble thoughts, enshrined in noble diction, is the most flagitious ignorance. In it the Mohamedan intellect of India has reached its highest fruition, its grandest height. Sawda and Mir Taqi, Mir Hassan and Mir Soz, Atash and Nasikh, Zauq and Ghalib will stand comparison with the greatest poets of any age or any nation. In their works we cannot fail to notice the sublimest heights of poetic imagination, the most placid, imperturbable philosophy of life, the struggle of high souls with the uglier realities of life, the laughter and tears of humanity, the power of soothing and healing afflicted hearts. They make us see and feel and know what life is. They lift us from our dead-selves to higher things ; the true province, the essential duty of a poet. But have we now got any one to compare with them ? Has the spring of the Mohamedan intellect passed and gone, gone irrevocably, irredeemably ? Is Urdu literature, now, doomed to sterility ? I cannot take such a pessimistic view of things. It was only in 1869 that one of the greatest of our poets and prose writers—Ghalib—was laid to rest. Not even fifty years have yet elapsed since he ceased to sing those eternal notes of sadness of which his own life was an illustration and a commentary. I decline to believe that within this period the Mohamedan intellect has completely withered away. No ! Urdu literature has yet before it a wondrous career of advance and expansion. Nor are there even now men wanting, men possessing unrivalled powers of intellect and imagination ; but circumstances, which enmesh and enervate the human will and paralyse the human intellect, have either crushed or stifled the great gifts with which nature has endowed them. The ceaseless struggle for existence, the growing poverty of our community, the necessity of earning a decent livelihood, the want of court patronage, the absence of sympathy on the part of the rich and wealthy for letters and men of letters : all these have, in a large measure, contributed to the extinction of a class of men who pursued literature as a profession or who sought learning and literature as an avenue to fame and distinction. No body has felt this more deeply, more keenly, more bitterly than the present writer, but to a true lover of letters these very disadvantages would rather tend to stimulate than to extinguish that supreme overmastering passion for the acquisition of human knowledge. Whatever has been done towards the growth of our literature for the last forty years has been done by such men, and we only hope and trust that their number, as time goes by, will increase rather than decrease. No people, without a literature, can ever

thrive ; and this is a fact which we cannot too clearly and forcibly impress upon our co-religionists. Sir Syed Ahmad—that gifted statesman—very correctly appreciated the importance of a true, genuine, popular literature; and it was to this end that in 1870 he established the *Tahzibul Akhlaq*, “The Social Reformer,” “the professed object of which was to display most effectively the resources of the Urdu language as a means of expressing modern ideas.”

It is one of the most healthy and promising signs of the times that this necessity for a national literature is now being felt more and more deeply and more and more widely. In the September number of the *Salai Am* my esteemed friend, Mir Nasir Ali Khan Bahadur, its distinguished editor, has invited the opinion of his co-religionists as to the question of forming a society for the cultivation and promotion of Hindustani literature. In this proposal he has the warmest support and the most enthusiastic approbation of every Mohamedan, nay, of every Indian, interested in the future of Urdu literature. There is no doubt that a society, consisting of men of talents, of eminence, of acknowledged reputation, would be a society at once weighty in influence and fruitful in consequence. The grand aim of this proposed society, as I conceive it, is to set up a recognized authority, imposing on us a high standard in matters of intellect and taste. It is not necessary to enter into the details of the constitution of the society, but we might here pause and consider the best means of attaining our purpose and of using that purpose to good account. Its centre must, of necessity, be Delhi, the seat of Moghul Emperors, the home and hearth of purest and chastest Hindustani. No other place can be what Delhi is. Even in its ruins it stands, among the Indian cities, unique and unrivalled. Where else can we have a town, round which so thickly cluster the traditions of ages ? Where else can we have a place (Lucknow excepted) associated with the memory and lives of so many great men, and it is this precisely which confers on it its own special, ineffable charm. It is Delhi, therefore, which was, and which must ever remain, the reigning Queen of our language, and this Queen must we now ask to establish for us ‘the High Court of letters’ which would lay down authoritative rules of language, decide all questions of style, pronounce judgments on matters relating to literary taste ; in fine, set up the standard of literary excellence.

I am deliberately of opinion, therefore, that Delhi, and Delhi alone, should be the seat and centre of this society ; but its members must be limited and the qualifications for its membership severely and rigorously fixed. Its gates should be shut against none, if he has the necessary qualifications. To its admission neither race nor religion should be a barrier. It must be a veritable republic of letters. Or else there is the danger—a fatal danger—of the society degenerating into a narrow, sectarian

oligarchy which an intellectual body must never be. Insularity and aloofness, factiousness and cliquishness are apt to destroy flexibility, adaptability, openness and clearness of mind. Its duty should be two-fold,—a duty which the society would discharge through the medium of its recognized organ. It should do original work, and, secondly, it should bring nearer home to the Indians, by means of authorized translations, the works of great Western writers. We cannot afford to cast aside the gifts of European civilisation. Nor can we pass over, in disdainful silence, great contributions to learning made by Europe. Thus, and thus alone, shall we annex a large tract of knowledge to our language. We shall improve our prose, we shall enrich our thoughts, we shall pave the way for original work so sorely needed and in which our literature has hitherto been so singularly and so conspicuously poor and deficient.

I use the word 'original' in opposition to a work which is imitative or which is a mere adaptation or translation of an already existing work. By original work I mean literary criticisms, historical researches, any work of art or fiction which owes its conception and execution to the genius of the author and the author alone. To achieve anything great requires years of apprenticeship; to train and educate national taste needs centuries of direction, guidance, wholesome restraint and effective control.

But wholesome restraint and effective control can only be exercised by a body of men who command the public confidence and who, by their past services to letters, are in a position to assume the role of dictators. It is for this reason, and for no other, that its membership should be open to none but acknowledged masters; men of accepted and acclaimed renown. For instance, who would dare question the verdict of a literary tribunal composed of men like Hali, Shibli, Nazir Ahmed, Syed Ali Bilgrami and others of their intellectual stature? To be a real, effective body, pledged to serious work, it must, on no account, be unwieldy. For our society it is not the number that we should aim at, but rather efficiency, earnestness and zeal. To keep it active and up to its high level, it would be desirable to publish its proceedings, to hold annual conferences where all the members could meet and submit the year's work for the consideration and criticism of their fellow-members. Its sphere of work should be eminently practical. It should edit and publish under its authority, works of our classical writers; translate into Hindustani valuable books written by European authors, suggest subjects for the study of those who interest themselves in our language and literature, encourage, by example and precept, critical studies and critical essays; and last, but not least, revive the forgotten study of Arabic and Persian languages.

The achievements of the *Nadwatul-Ulama* are, indeed, highly encouraging, and I am sure that a society, formed on the lines indicated, would soon

become a powerful engine of reform and culture, carrying sweetness and light to the remotest corner of India. I rejoice that my distinguished friend has seriously taken up this matter, and I feel certain that he will carry it through with his characteristic energy and enthusiasm. In an incredibly short time Mir Nasir Ali Khan has succeeded in securing for his journal, the *Salai Am*, a position and a status second to none among the journals of modern India. Its articles are sound and scholarly, luminous and illuminating. They are free from the defects—the besetting sin of oriental writers—of over-heavy richness and overwrought finery of style. They are, on the other hand, perfect models of simple, flowing, chaste and vigorous Urdu. Mir Nasir Ali Khan's efforts, in the direction of improving the Urdu language, constitute an era, a landmark in the literary history of the Indian Mohamedans. He is laying, slowly and silently, the foundation of a splendid modern literature, now in the process of making. This, like many other movements, which are stirring India to its depths, is a sign full of hope and promise. With the help and co-operation of his countrymen my friend, the Editor of the *Salai Am*, will soon wipe the stain off the escutcheon of the Mohamedan community, the stain which sullies it, the stain of the absence of a noble, dignified, modern, progressive Urdu literature, worthy of its tradition and consistent with its past.

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